

A challenge few Americans accept

DURING THE 1960s, AT THE HEIGHT of the American rampage in Vietnam, a famous Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, published a provocative book titled *The Ironies of American History*.

It was a book that quite instantly became a focus for campus intellectuals who at the time were gathering their thoughts, as well as their courage, in order to come together to challenge the American establishment's war in Southeast Asia.

It was a book that explained the subtleties and the complexities of American arrogance, hypocrisy, and self-centredness in ways that made joining the growing opposition to the Vietnam War both satisfying and patriotic at the same time.

Today, in the 1990s, the American empire has emerged triumphant from the post-World War II Cold War — a nuclear age confrontation fought through a panoply of regional proxy wars on top of a variety of covert means which in retrospect climaxed with a near-nuclear confrontation in 1962.

Memories of Vietnam have substantially faded — replayed by new images of the projection of American power in such places as the Gulf against Iraq and subsumed by the growing preoccupation within the US with domestic concerns.

Today, in the 1990s, we are all however living through a historical phase of a very different kind than in previous decades. It is considerably more difficult though to grasp the contemporary situation — partly because appreciating the current moment is usually more illusive than in retrospect, but even more importantly because the situation today is far more amorphous and multi-faceted than was the case some decades ago.

Furthermore, so far anyway, there isn't any one specific book, like Niebuhr's, that focuses today's more diffuse and convoluted issues or that offers a specific alternative vision.

If there is, though, one particular individual who personifies standing up against prevailing opinion and exposing the ongoing militarist and imperialist tendencies of the United States it is Professor Noam Chomsky.

A few days ago Chomsky was in Washington speaking before his usual standing-room-only crowd. He had come this

time to support the *Covertaction Quarterly*, a unique magazine which has for some 15 years now been uncovering and exposing the CIA's and the American military's covert activities throughout the world.

As usual, Chomsky relentlessly attacked the deeply ingrained political myths which pervade the American psyche and which are so prevalently and continually spread far and wide by the powerful mainstream elements of the American media.

At the end of his talk, Chomsky received a thunderous standing ovation; while throughout the evening cable TV's C-Span network recorded the entire event.

Chomsky embodies, more than any other contemporary personality, the most sophisticated and penetrating political-intellectual critique of today's "American world order".

Chomsky's is a devastating indictment of the falsehoods and distortions with which the American corporate class — the military-industrial complex if you will — relentlessly pursues its quest for dominance both at home and abroad.

Chomsky's is an intellectually numbing challenge to the ways in which the American corporate class manipulates democracy at home to suit its own enrichment and how it takes on enemies abroad using covert means when possible, military means if necessary.

"Over the last dozen years," noted a recent review in *The Chicago Tribune*, "Chomsky was the most often cited living author. Among intellectual luminaries of all eras, Chomsky is placed eighth, just behind Plato and Sigmund Freud".

"One of the most respected and influential intellectuals in the world," says *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Former California governor and presidential aspirant Jerry Brown weights in saying: "Noam Chomsky ruthlessly exposes the dark side of power. Everything politics is, Chomsky isn't. He takes you where few dare to tread".

Even the bastion of establishment thinking, *The New York Times*, which Chomsky, incidentally, repeatedly pokes his finger at with considerable relish, notes he is "arguably the most important intellectual alive".

But for a number of crucial reasons the Chomsky challenge to the established order is exceedingly difficult to rally around.

From



Washington

Some Americans believe that among intellectual luminaries of all eras, Noam Chomsky is placed eighth just behind Plato and Freud, yet for the major print media, including the op-ed pages of the major American newspapers, he is all but non-existent, and his books are published only by a small radical publishing house in Boston

Of course there's the basic problem that the gigantic financial and political institutions Chomsky challenges are the very ones that own and control the American mass media. Thus in this age of media saturation Chomsky's actual exposure to the American public is severely limited by the corporate-controlled and government-manipulated press.

True, occasionally people can see or hear Chomsky on national television. But this is exceedingly occasionally. In recent years, except for one rare hour-long appearance with Bill Moyers on Public Television, and a C-Span rebroadcast of Chomsky talks in 1991 and then earlier this month, one never gets to see and

hear Chomsky in the mass media but for an occasional moment.

As for the major print media, including the op-ed pages of the major American newspapers, Chomsky is all but non-existent. His recent books have for some years now been published by a small radical publishing house in Boston South End Press — and his articles usually appear in such low-circulation magazines as *Z*, *Mother Jones*, and *Covertaction*.

Beyond this major limitation of dealing with the "establishment" press — a limitation which especially limits young people from becoming aware of the Chomsky mystique — the very breadth and scope of Chomsky's criticism is so his views very easily. One must do a great deal of contemplation and pondering to grasp on to Chomsky; and few outside academic circles have the luxury of time and situation to do so.

Add to this that while Chomsky's criticism of policies and institutions is legend, his prescription for alternative political structures and competing policies is quite limited. Chomsky is first and foremost an analyst and critic; he is not a revolutionary offering his followers another path. Instead he is a major voice of rationality and truth providing energy and ammunition for those who are actually fighting social and political battles.

In addition to these, other factors which substantially limit Chomsky's ability to reach a mass audience and sustain their attention; unlike in the 1960s when Niebuhr's challenge to American foreign policy was written, there is today no one particular focus of protest, no one rallying point, no omnipresent anti-War movement that can serve as a focal issue around which alternative policies can take hold.

That evening in Washington, even though Chomsky was speaking on behalf of the *Covertaction* magazine, and even though he made many references to US foreign policy throughout the evening, not once did he mention the PLO, Israel, Iraq or the Mid-east!

Possibly even more startling, not a single questioner raised any of these subjects with him during the question period that followed. And this was the case even though Chomsky spoke a few days before what was supposed to be the start of the implementation phase of the Israeli-PLO agreement on December 13.